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Voice

Common Questions and Answers

***Q** Although the EAP professional was silent on the subject of my decision to terminate an employee, I ended our discussion with the feeling that I had a “green light.” I think the EAP believes there is nothing left to offer this employee. Should I assume this is the case?*

A Do not relinquish responsibility for ownership of your decision or infer from the EAP professional’s silence that the termination decision is supported or not supported. The silence that you experienced in the conversation with the EAP professional should be interpreted only as a professional responsibility of the EAP to take no stand either in favor of or against administrative action. This prevents the EAP from interfering with the organization’s administrative processes and is fundamental to the integration of EAPs in the work culture. The expertise of EAP professionals should not be used as a means to judge your management decisions. A disappointing outcome of a decision you thought was approved of by the EAP professional would cause you to blame the EAP later. Even worse, the employee might think the EAP played a role in the decision.

***Q** I have heard that the EAP can be used as an “alternative” to disciplinary action, but should not be used as a “substitute” for disciplinary action. What is the difference between the two?*

A “Substitute” use of the EAP means using an EAP referral in the place of disciplinary action. This confuses employees and turns the EAP into a disciplinary tool. It also frustrates the supervisor because the likelihood of an employee refusing the EAP referral is high. When the EAP is used as an “alternative” to a disciplinary action, the employee is offered the EAP as a choice over a pending, warranted, or possible disciplinary step. Substitution does not offer the employee such a choice, and therefore does not facilitate ownership by the employee of the decision to seek EAP help. Supervisors who find disciplinary actions so unpleasant that they can’t take them are more prone to the substitution misstep and may be disappointed with the results. Although they may feel action was taken in response to a performance concern, improvement in the employee’s performance may be only short lived.



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***Q** I made a supervisor referral of an employee to the EAP, but I also decided to give her a written reprimand a couple of days later because there have been so many warnings. She then cancelled her EAP appointment. This clearly shows there was no personal problem, correct?*

***Q** I denied my employee's written request for some expensive office equipment. She has since demonstrated a hostile attitude toward me. Denying her request was appropriate and my prerogative, so why such a reaction?*

A Disciplinary action that immediately follows a supervisor referral can predictably undermine the referral. Your employee probably believed there was no longer a benefit to be gained from going to the EAP appointment after receiving the action. This does not mean that the disciplinary action was unwarranted. But it may have been more effectively employed as a backup alternative to the supervisor referral.

Most employees accept supervisor referrals to prevent a disciplinary action for continued performance problems, to please the supervisor, or to get help with a difficult personal problem they would rather manage on their own. Ironically, any of these reasons can lead to the successful resolution of a personal problem, even if associated with denial. A disciplinary action dispensed at the time of the referral removes the incentive for visiting the EAP. Consider making EAP referrals earlier to avoid feeling compelled to both refer the employee and dispense overdue disciplinary action.

A Your employee's response to the denial of her request demonstrates her emotional reaction to it, but it is not possible to say what underlies her response. All of us are subject to management's decisions, and one tough lesson to learn is to avoid taking such denials personally.

The general trend of satisfactory work performance allows most employees to put management decisions we don't agree with in perspective so we can remain focused on our jobs. Some employees do not cope with rejection well. For some, rejection causes shame, and rage may be the natural response. Such an employee may be convinced you have targeted him or her for unfair treatment. Explaining your rationale for the denial, rather than having her imagine what it might be, can open communication, demonstrate respect, and reduce the risk of an adverse reaction. Consider an EAP referral if change isn't forthcoming.

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***Q** I am a worrywart about how management thinks my work unit is doing. Although I have been a manager for several years, I can't seem to quiet myself down enough to enjoy my job. What can I do to change? Can the EAP help?*

***Q** What are the key ingredients supervisors should consider when helping an employee correct performance?*

***Q** Our work unit's director has subtly discouraged employees from using the EAP because he does not want employees to "air the laundry" of our work unit along with personal problems. This information is also confidential, correct?*

A Although some worry can arguably be considered a healthy and self-preserving virtue of a good manager, being in a state of excessive anxiety and distress will interfere with your ability to perform the duties of your position. Recognizing that your worrying cannot exist in isolation but will affect the employees you supervise can motivate you to gain better control over it. The EAP can help you locate sources of help and understanding in what contributes to your worrisome state. There are many approaches including thought blocking; stress management techniques; reinterpreting the balance between reality, fears, and worry; and making certain no medical condition contributes to your anxiety.

A Helping an employee correct a performance problem employs steps known to facilitate change within the context of an effective relationship you have purposely developed over time. So, correcting performance and managing people is both an art and a science. Three important steps in correcting performance that are often neglected by supervisors include:

- 1) Placing emphasis on the problem rather than on the employee. This approach elicits a partnership with the employee to solve the problem rather than a defensive reaction to avoid guilt and blame.
- 2) Involving the employee in analyzing the problem. You may be certain of the problem's cause, but helping your employee analyze and examine the cause will instill greater commitment to resolve it.
- 3) Following up with your employee. This step reinforces your employee's investment in correcting the performance problem and inhibits a setback.

A Yes, confidentiality of EAP records pertains not only to the identities of those who use the program and the personal information they share with the EAP professional, but also other information such as sensitive issues and problems of work units, rumors, morale concerns, and more. This information is held in confidence in accordance with EAP policies and is not shared with other parts of the work organization. It is not unusual for a manager to be concerned about what is reported outside the work unit by employees, but managers have nothing to fear from the EAP. EAP professionals frequently learn about many issues of the work organization, concerns of employee work groups, trends in morale, and more. But this is what makes EAP professionals so valuable when they are invited to help plan programs and services that benefit employees, consult on policies that address employee issues, and make other contributions to the health of the organization.

***Q** I can't counsel my employees, but is there something appropriate that I can do to help them manage their stress better, particularly if they are not individually inclined to visit the EAP?*

***Q** Sometimes I discover in the middle of a corrective interview that I am responsible for the performance problem of an employee. It might be due to lack of communication, faulty instructions or lack of follow up. Won't I lose respect if I apologize or admit it?*

A There is a role for you to play, but it is linked to legitimate supervisory concerns. Do you see that your employees take the rest breaks to which they are entitled? Do you encourage your line supervisors not to interfere with such breaks? Do you take breaks yourself and model work-life balance? Doing so will help your employees feel it is okay to do the same. Ask your employees what you can do to help them manage work stress better. You may be surprised at the good suggestions they will make. Be sure to ask individual employees how they are doing during stressful times. A show of empathy goes a long way toward helping employees feel appreciated and toward helping them keep a balanced perspective when the going gets tough.

A Few things are harder than admitting fault, particularly in the middle of a corrective interview. But experienced managers know that no one is ever despised for admitting their mistakes. It is worse for your employee to walk away feeling unfairly corrected. Willingness to admit your own contribution to a performance problem can gain you respect and help your employee admit to his or her own role. When correcting performance, it is a good practice to always ask yourself ahead of time whether you have some ownership in the problem. You might prevent the need for a corrective interview or prevent discovery of your own role in the middle of the discussion.

**For assistance, contact your
EAP professional
800.765.0770**